

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 178 836

CG 013 949

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TITLE Sex Differences in the Content and Structure of
College Students' Descriptions of Future Plans.
PUB DATE 79
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the
Midwestern Psychological Association (51st, Chicago,
Illinois, May 3-5, 1979)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Aspiration; *Career Choice; *College Students;
Higher Education; *Marriage; Objectives; *Planning;
Role Theory; Self Actualization; *Sex Differences

ABSTRACT

A content analysis of college students' essays on their plans for the future revealed sex differences in both content and structure. Essays were coded for the presence or absence, and the order, of career and marriage/family plans. In addition, the certainty of the plans was inferred from the use of contingency and probability qualifiers. The 110 female subjects mentioned family plans more often than the 85 male subjects, and were more likely to mention them first. Both sexes, however, were equally likely to mention career plans. More uncertainty was evidenced in the essays of male subjects, as they used qualifiers significantly more than females. Closer examination, however, revealed that women appeared to have accounted for the contingencies of husband and children by building flexibility into the future plans themselves. Females choosing traditional (N=39) did not differ from those choosing non-traditional (N=32) careers in the content or structure of their essays. The traditional women, however, were somewhat more likely to mention children. The possibility that women more than men, and traditional more than non-traditional women, may be more concerned with integrating the various aspects of their sex-role than with achieving excellence in any one capacity was discussed. (Author)

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ED178836

Sex Differences in the Content and Structure of College
Students' Descriptions of Future Plans

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Paper Presented at the Midwestern
Psychological Association Convention,
Chicago, 1979.

GG013949

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Sex Differences in the Content and
Structure of College Students' Descriptions
of Future Plans

The fact that future goals may influence present behavior has been shown in the work of Raynor and his colleagues. Raynor (1967) provided evidence that achievement motives are accentuated when future goal attainment is seen as depending upon present achievement behaviors. For example, a student who hopes to be a psychologist would be expected to work harder in introductory psychology class than in introductory philosophy class.

Tangi (1975) extended this finding to explain depressed career performance in women. Because of the emphasis on marriage and children as a woman's central goal, the motivation to prepare for a career may be lacking, i.e., a woman whose goal is to become a wife and mother may be less motivated to do well in an introductory psychology class if it is not perceived as being relevant to her future goal.

Therefore, investigations into subjects' future plans may aid our understanding of present achievement behaviors.

Several studies (e.g., Carlson, 1971; Cross 1971; Lamm, Schmidt & Trommsdorf, 1976) reported that males' future plans showed an emphasis on occupational concerns, and females' on family concerns; but most college women did have plans that included a career. Douvan and Adelson (1966), however, noted that females were less realistic in their career plans than were males, and were likely to choose future careers that represented extensions of the feminine role.

Tangri (1975) divided a sample of women into those choosing traditionally feminine careers (i.e., occupations in which 50% or more of the people employed are female), and those choosing non-traditional careers, (careers in which 28% or less of those employed are female). Women choosing non-traditional careers showed significantly more concern with future work excellence than did traditionals in their essays on their ideal future.

Thus, a picture emerges of the college female as:

1. being more concerned with family than career plans,
2. being less realistic than males when planning for a career,
3. choosing a career that is an extension of her female role.

In addition, it appears that women choosing traditionally masculine careers are more concerned with future work excellence than those choosing traditionally feminine occupations.

The present study was designed to further investigate these differences in future planning. Subjects' essays on their plans for the future were coded for their concern regarding career and/or marriage/family (i.e., the content of the essays) as well as the degree of certainty about their plans, as determined by the use of contingency or probability qualifiers (i.e., the structural component of the essays).

While much research into career choice has focused on the differences between women oriented toward different types of careers (e.g., Tangri, 1975), we feel that there is a need to go beyond simply classifying subjects by their expected job categories. We therefore believe that a content-analysis scheme of coding free-response descriptions is necessary. Such a methodology permits both a better understanding of the mechanisms of career choice as well as the processes involved in

integrating the career choice with the sex role.

Method

Subjects were 110 female and 85 male introductory psychology students. They were given 15 minutes to write down their plans for the future.

The content of the essays was analyzed to ascertain the subjects' concern with career and marriage/family plans by noting the presence or absence of these plans and the order of their presentation. The certainty of the plans was inferred by the structural analysis of the subjects' use of qualifiers. Both contingency qualifiers (i.e., "if" and "depending on") and probability qualifiers (i.e., "probably" and "maybe") were coded.

Results

The coding scheme resulted in five content categories:

1. the mention of career plans first, family plans second;
2. the mention of family first, career second;
3. the mention of career only;
4. the mention of family only; or
5. neither career nor marriage/family plans were mentioned.

The overall χ^2 on these categories showed significant sex differences ($\chi^2 (4) = 20.14, p < .005$). Further analyses replicated earlier findings that females more often mentioned family plans ($\chi^2 (1) = 13.79, p < .005$), and more often mentioned them first ($\chi^2 (1) = 6.60, p < .01$). Also, as found in previous studies, both sexes were equally likely to mention career plans ($\chi^2 (1) = 0.31, n.s.$).

A particularly interesting finding was that the male subjects evidenced more uncertainty in their plans by including significantly

more contingency and probability qualifiers ($\chi^2 (1) = 5.62, p < .02$).

The first of our secondary analyses dealt with this issue of the use of qualifiers. For both males and females who did not use qualifiers, the content of the qualified plan was noted. Men and women did not differ in the number of times they used probabilities concerning education, nor a general category which included hobbies, travel, and living arrangements. Women, however, were more likely to attach probability qualifiers to statements about marriage and children, and men to statements about their careers.

In terms of contingency qualifiers, only women used statements in which marriage and children were contingent upon career or education and vice versa. Men and women did not differ in their use of contingencies to define whether they would marry or not, or have children or not, but men were more likely to use contingency statements concerning living arrangements. Only male subjects used statements in which other things depended upon money.

The second supplementary analysis concerned the differences between those women choosing traditional versus non-traditional careers, using Tangri's (1975) criteria. Our sample included 39 traditionals and 32 non-traditionals. We found no significant differences between the two groups on either the content or the structural variables. That is, those women choosing traditional and those choosing non-traditional occupations were equally likely to mention career and family, and were also equally likely to use qualifiers in their essays. It was evident, however, that non-traditional women were somewhat less likely to mention children.

Discussion

In sum, the present study replicated earlier findings that females are more likely to mention family in their future plans, and that both sexes are equally likely to mention careers. In addition, each sex was more likely to use qualifiers (i.e., express concern and uncertainty) in typically sex role characteristic ways. For example, women were more likely to use qualifiers in plans about marriage and children, and men, with career and money concerns.

The surprising finding was that men seemed less certain about their futures than did women. In contrast to the current realities of women's occupational life cycles, their essays were not filled with probability and contingency statements. Consistent with the fact that women's career plans are typically altered to fit with the husbands, and to include raising a family, the relative lack of qualifiers may at first seem unrealistic. Closer examination, however, revealed that the women tended to lay out very specific plans integrating career and family by detailing patterns of working full-time, part-time, and not at all (when their children are young). Thus, they have accounted for the contingencies of husband and children by building flexibility into the future plans themselves.

In terms of the traditional and non-traditional women, it is interesting to note that while they may differ along some dimensions, like the mention of future work excellence as reported by Tangri (1975), they did not differ in the content or structure of their essays as analyzed in the present study. Our finding that traditional women were somewhat more likely to mention children in their essays may shed some light on

this matter. Traditional women may have spent more of their allotted essay writing time (and, indeed, may spend more of their time in general) integrating their career with the mother role.

Thus, when thinking about their futures, women more than men (and traditional more than non-traditional women) may be more concerned with integrating the various aspects of their sex role than in achieving excellence in any one capacity. The necessity of taking into account an increased number of factors may suppress the emphasis on excellence. First, they must find the time to accomplish their varied goals.

Current Work

We are currently completing work on a more intensive and detailed coding scheme which we hope will better clarify these patterns of college students' planning for career and family.

We will also be correlating these results with personality measures that were collected at the same time, including autonomous and social achievement, affiliation, self-esteem, and fear of success.

In addition, this procedure is presently being replicated with an older student sample to assess possible age differences, and will be run on a New York sample to assess cross-regional differences.

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